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Venezuelan Legislative Elections Rein In President Hugo Chávez's Power

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Venezuela held legislative elections on Sept. 26 that both the administration of President Hugo Chávez and the fragmented opposition, united under a fragile umbrella coalition, the Mesa de Unidad Democrático (MUD), considered decisive for the future of the country. The governing Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) treated the democratic exercise as if it were a plebiscite and put all its effort into winning an absolute majority—two-thirds of the 165 seats in the unicameral Asamblea Nacional (AN)—which would have allowed it to continue governing without the need to consult or cut deals with any other sector. The opposition accepted the challenge and set it sights on obtaining at least half plus one of the seats. Neither side met its most ambitious goal.

Since, after the voting, both sides spoke of winners and losers, all partisan analyses looked at the elections using the philosophical question, "Is saying the glass is half full the same as saying it is half empty?" On the surface, it would seem to be the same, but the cleverness of the question is that it leaves open the possibility of a dual reading, in this case, of the final election results.

Measured by voting blocs in the legislature, the tally gave the PSUV 98 seats, the MUD 62, and the small Patria para Todos (PPT), a leftist splinter group, two. The three remaining seats are reserved for indigenous groups, which in the last Constitution gained the right to elect their own representatives. In numbers of votes, the PSUV obtained 5.5 million (48.19%), excluding the indigenous, who usually vote with the PSUV, and the two other groups together took 5.4 million (47.16%).

Governing party comes out ahead

A preliminary observation makes it clear that the future—apart from any effects of governmental actions in the two years remaining until the presidential elections—is favorable for the administration. It counts on a powerful party apparatus and, above all, on a leadership—that of the president—whose deep roots surprise analysts and the international press and even its severest critics. Chávez is loved, especially among the long-neglected sectors of Venezuelan society, and the PSUV has a clear government program.

The opposition's situation is very different. The MUD's 23 member groups, contrary to what their name implies, have been unable to develop a unified platform and lack a charismatic leader to rally around. The day after the elections, the names of three opposition leaders were being touted to challenge Chávez in the Dec. 2, 2012, presidential elections.

"Few things could have hit the electorate as badly," analyst Federico Welsch, professor of political science at the state Universidad Simón Bolívar, was quoted as saying in La Nación newspaper.

"For now, the opposition continues demonstrating that it is united only in its hatred of Chávez, expressed especially among the well-off middle class and the economically dominant group,"
wrote political commentator and Uruguayan Sen. Constanza Moreira in the Uruguayan daily La República.

The administration never admitted it, but, in the hours following the election, it took the failure to win a two-thirds majority—the "magic number" that would have allowed Chávez to govern while ignoring the opposition—as a defeat. Later, and within the framework that speaks of a glass half full or half empty, it accepted the ballot-box reality and celebrated the results.

"We did not obtain the ambitious goal of two-thirds, but we achieved a very important victory. Never has a Venezuelan party obtained 60% of the legislative seats competing alone against 23 opposition parties," said Vice President Elías Jaua.

PSUV vice president Aristóbulo Istúriz said, "The election result is a triumph for the Revolución Bolivariana, which after 10 years was able to win a sizeable majority of 30 deputies against the combined forces of the opposition, the deserters [referring to the PPT], and the most recalcitrant right." Immersed in full-blown triumphalism, Istúriz nevertheless said an important truth: "Few governments in the world can count on such a comfortable majority, and it is uncommon for a single party to win such a significant number of seats."

**Opposition immediately looks to presidential elections**

Three weeks after the elections, the opposition has not altered its initial reading and continues insisting that it is the big winner. Since 2005, when it boycotted the legislative elections and ran no candidates, it has not had representatives in the AN (NotiSur, Dec. 16, 2005). As of January, when the new legislators take their seats, it will have 62 deputies.

Viewed simplistically, it is a huge increase. Nevertheless, the opposition returns to the parliament with 21 fewer deputies than it had during the 2000-2005 session. Burdened with an unjustified triumphalist spirit, and ignoring the precariousness of their unity, the opposition leaders' personal ambitions began to emerge the day after the election.

"At this time, when it should be facing the challenge of moving from campaign coordination to political coordination, by beginning to push supposed candidates, the opposition committed its most serious mistake," said Venezuelan political analyst Luis Vicente León.

On Sept. 27, the opposition was floating the names of three potential candidates to compete against Chávez in December 2012.

Primero Justicia (PJ) put forth, "with all the pride in the world, the great figure of Henrique Capriles Radonski."

The Organización Nacional de la Unidad Democrática said that "the only highly regarded leader capable of defeating Chávez is Deputy-elect Enrique Mendoza."

Súmate, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that describes itself as a "vote-monitoring group," said that, "among possible presidential contenders, no one can compare with María Corina Machado, the democratic candidate who obtained the most votes on Sept. 26."

Beyond the opposition's mistake of opening a dispute within the MUD, the three proposed candidates will have to justify their questionable past to the electorate. Capriles Radonski is free
thanks to an amnesty decreed by Chávez (he was in prison for participating in an attack on the Cuban Embassy during the 2002 aborted coup). Miranda also benefitted from the pardon after he was convicted of attacking, destroying, and closing the government-run Venezolana de Televisión during the same period. Machado, who is said to have a very good political relationship with former US President George W. Bush, is under investigation to determine the origin of the sizeable amounts of money controlled by his NGO and for his participation in the aborted coup.

Despite the opposition's mistakes, despite its leaders' history, and despite 62 not being more than 98, no one ignores its important leap forward. The opposition gave the administration a significant scare, frustrating its hope of winning an absolute majority in the AN, and, if it knows how to use it, it will have opened a great potential for the future.

However, the opposition did not know how to respond to Chávez's bluster, when, in the middle of MUD's celebrations, he taunted them, saying, "They say that they are the majority. Well, then, if that's the case, I publically challenge them to call a recall referendum. I submit my job to the will of the people, and, if I get even one vote less that they do, I will cease being the constitutional and democratic president of Venezuela." No one responded.

**US media reaction predictable**

As in all large and small political events in Venezuela, the US was not absent this time either. Nor was the specter of the US. During the entire campaign, the governing party said that "US imperialism" was financing the opposition parties, and, when the names of possible candidates to oppose Chávez in 2012 began to be bandied about, the president said sarcastically, "Don't speculate, because the US will decide on the candidate."

In another arena, on Oct. 1, The Washington Post ran an editorial extremely critical of the Venezuelan government, titled, "How Chávez lost the popular vote and won by a landslide." The US paper questioned Venezuela's electoral system—a mixed system with both individual and party candidates, similar to that of other countries including Great Britain—and said that districts were gerrymandered to benefit the governing party.

Venezuelan Ambassador to the US Bernardo Álvarez responded to the editorial, and he was as critical of the newspaper as it had been of his country. Álvarez said that "not only does the Post attempt to disregard a clean and transparent electoral process, but it also reaches the extreme of blatantly lying about the results, claiming that the opposition coalition managed to obtain 52% of the so-called 'popular vote.' If we insist on adding all the results of the party-line votes published by the National Electoral Council (CNE), it becomes clear that the 10 opposition parties that make up the Table of Unity (MUD) received 47.16% of the 'national popular vote.' The PSUV alone received 48.19%." He added, "Beyond all of the misleading claims used by the Post to misinform its readers, what is most ignominious is the condescension shown to the Venezuelan people and the peaceful and democratic road they have chosen....Venezuelans have exercised their right to vote 15 times since President Chávez was first elected in 1998...In this most recent election, the Venezuelan people demonstrated their democratic vocation, along with their faith in the transparency of the country's modern electoral system, in historic numbers—66% of the country's 17 million registered voters cast ballots on Sept. 26."

The opposition Caracas newspaper Tal Cual also complained, although not as strongly, about the Post's editorial.